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SMALL WARS JOURNAL

Promises and Pitfalls: Sino-Afghan Relations

By [Lemar Alexander Farhad](#)

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Promises and Pitfalls: Sino-Afghan Relations

Lemar Alexander Farhad

Introduction

China's relationship with Afghanistan dates back to 4 B.C. The two have been connected by the old "Silk Road," Buddhism, Islam, trade, border issues, Russian and Indian hegemony, their bilateral relationships with Pakistan, and finally cooperation and competition with the United States. Sino-Afghan relations cannot be studied in a vacuum. The vast area stretching from the steppes of Central Asia, to the shores of the Indian Ocean, from Iran to the teak forests of Burma is like a giant organism where an incision in any one part affects every other part. Any developments, positive or negative are likely to affect and be affected by China's relationships with other regional players. Lately, as evidenced by the Aynak copper project and arrangement of peace talks with the Taliban, China seems to have abandoned its cautiously courteous policies in Afghanistan in favor of a more hands on approach.

"Promises and Pitfalls," refers to, China's relationship with Afghanistan, which has come to a fork in the road. It can deliver on the potential of its promises or present an impassable pitfall. The promises are mutually beneficial economic and technological exchanges. Afghanistan can benefit from China's agricultural, engineering, mineralogy, and industrial know how. China can benefit from a proximate consumer market and nearby minerals that she needs. This will create a framework of economic prosperity, which will give the Afghan government the means to fight the insurgency more effectively by deterring the populace from waging war by enabling them to engage in productive activities. It will also prevent the spread of Islamic extremism to China's tumultuous western provinces. "Pitfalls" refers to the notion that should China support the official and unofficial Pakistani stance and paranoid view towards Afghanistan and India, and insist on *rapprochement* with the Taliban, instead of their total annihilation, it will produce a failed state that will negatively impact the region, such as it did in the 1990s.

This study examines the history and the evolution of Sino-Afghan relations, the complex interrelationships of Pakistan, India, as they affect Sino-Afghan relations, and finally we will conclude with the most likely outcomes of Beijing's Afghan policy—whether they choose the road of promise or pitfall.

From Empires to Nation States

The old "Silk Road," stretched from Rome to China, and passed through what is now Afghanistan some 2,100 years ago. In the times of empires and emperors, China and what is now Afghanistan worked together toward mutual economic prosperity.^[i] In 104 B.C., an official from the Afghan kingdom travelled to the Chinese Imperial Court to establish relations and work on cross-cutting issues.^[ii] Through Buddhism in the fourth and fifth centuries, Chinese pilgrims made their way to Buddhist centers in

Afghanistan and India, while Afghan and Persian merchants sold their goods in the Chinese markets.[iii] Buddhism continued to bind the two empires. In 636 B.C. Chinese monks such as the historical figure Hsuan Tsang, visited the Afghan kingdom and marveled at the Buddha's of Bamian.[iv] As Islam moved eastward, the relationships between central Asian khanates, and the Afghan Kingdom took on a more geo-political turn. According to Shen-Yu Dai, the Afghans sent thirty-five annual missions to China between 713 and 755.[v] As the Chinese T'ang dynasty weakened, the Chinese showed deference to the Afghans under the leadership of Afghan Emperor Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni.[vi] The present day Sino-Afghan border took shape under the Qing dynasty of 1644-1912.[vii] As China pushed westwards through a series of battles, wars, stealthy negotiations, and advanced statecraft, it gradually took over large swaths of western lands and subjugated the ethnic Turkic/Mongol peoples of that area.[viii] Eventually, China's western expansion met Czarist Russia and the Afghan Empire at the Pamirs. Advancements in maritime technology bolstered the effectiveness and importance of ports. Gradually, China shifted its priorities to maritime routes and to the eastern parts of its empire.[ix]

As empires became nation states, China and Afghanistan resumed full diplomatic relations in 1955.[x] The two nations engaged in cautious diplomacy with one another throughout the 1950s. The Chinese sent high profile diplomats to Afghanistan and the Afghan Prime Minister Sardar Mohammed Daud Khan visited China in 1957 and again, in 1959. The relationship culminated to highest degree of cooperation when Prime Minister Daud signed the Sino-Afghan Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression in 1960.[xi] In the 1960s the Soviet Union propped up a Soviet style communist movement, known as the *Khalq* and then latter the *Parchem* political parties in Afghanistan. Not to be outdone, the Chinese introduced a Maoist movement, known as *Shola-e- Jawid*. According to historical documents by the UNHCR,

Formed in the mid to late 1960s, Shola-e Jawid is a hard-line Maoist mother organization that now has numerous factions. Few details are known about the group which published a weekly newspaper also called *Shola-e Jawid* ("The Permanent Torch"). Shola-e Jawid preached immediate revolution. Its ideology was based on achieving political ends through violence. It did not believe in using peaceful means in order to achieve its political goals, for it considered such methods to 'be bourgeois.' [xii]

China's miscalculation was selecting ethnic Hazara and Shite intellectuals to lead this movement. The Hazaras and Shiites lacked the social prestige to render the movement popular. Thus, it always remained a marginal player in the Afghan political scene. Of note is the fact that to date, the political party still maintains an active website.[xiii] This goes to show that China was willing to be more than just a symbolic, polite neighbor.

In 1963, the two nations also resolved their border dispute in the Pamirs. During this time, Afghanistan's foreign policy was controlled by Prime Minister Daud who was a staunch Afghan and Pashtun nationalist whose policies towards the Durand line angered the Pakistanis. Daud called Pakistan's claim over the Durand line and the Pashtun areas, "*revanchist*." Pakistan closed the border, and the relationship between Kabul and Islamabad reached an all-time low. Daud, through skillful diplomacy, turned towards China for new trade options.[xiv] However, the China deal never provided real economic results. The Soviet Union and Iran came to Afghanistan's aid and helped broker a deal with the United States for aid.[xv] This was the first time that Pakistan had become intertwined in Sino-Afghan relations. The trend continued and continues today. In many ways, the three nations are linked together geo-politically; just as their borders are.

The Seventies and Eighties

Throughout the 1970s, Sino-Afghan relations cooled off but remained polite.[xvi] Under the leadership of Daud, Afghanistan became dependent on the Soviet Union for military and economic development.[xvii] Daud's aims were to strengthen the Afghan Army for what he predicted was a pending military conflict with Pakistan. Moreover, Afghanistan developed closer ties with India during this time. This further pushed China to develop relations with Pakistan. By the 1970s, presumably under Soviet pressure, Daud crushed the Afghan Maoist movement, and the Shola-e-Javid party went underground.[xviii] The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 dramatically impacted China's relationship with Afghanistan. As Afghanistan went communist, and became a satellite of the Soviet state, China further strengthened its relationship with Pakistan as a means to counter and prevent Soviet hegemony. To this day, China is allied with Pakistan to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan and south and central Asia.[xix] Throughout the war between the Afghan resistance, (Mujahedeen) and the Soviet Union, China actively worked with America and Pakistan to provide arms and money to the Mujahedeen. Jonathan Ludwig provides U.S. government figures on Chinese support to the Mujahedeen, and states that China provided, "one-fifth of the Afghan resistance's weapons in some of the Northern provinces." [xx] China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the 1980s was to support Pakistan's agenda, and to cautiously work with the United States. The Soviets eventually withdrew in 1989. The Afghan Communist government collapsed two years later.

The Taliban-Pakistan and China

The Taliban arose in the summer of 1994 near Kandahar.[xxi] The Taliban were created, trained, equipped, and supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate.[xxii] They became Pakistan's answer to the Northern Alliance which was allied with Iran, Russia, and India. With Islamabad's support the Taliban, who are ethnically Pashtun, but ideologically trained by Pakistan to be devoid of Pashtun nationalism, soon captured almost all of Afghanistan. In early 1996, the Taliban joined forces with Al Qaeda and they became a potent and toxic mix of Wahhabism and militancy. According to Larry Goodson, "Over the next few years, the Taliban- Al Qaeda became more puritanical and intolerant of Afghanistan's northern minorities, and larger numbers of Pakistani 'volunteers' joined the movement." [xxiii] The Taliban were only recognized as a state by three nations—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. However, that did not mean that other countries did not seek to work with them. According to Andrew Scobell, China's ambassador to Pakistan Lu Shunlin secretly met with Mullah Omar in December of 2000. Beijing wanted assurances that the Taliban would not support Uighur extremists.[xxiv] Bill Gertz, reporting for the *Washington Times*, published an article on 28 September 2001, and reported that two Chinese companies, Zhongxing Telecom (ZTE) and Huawei Technologies operated in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2001.[xxv] As Ludwig argues, this level of cooperation is unlikely without the highest level of the PLA and Chinese government approval.[xxvi] In the case of the Taliban and Pakistan, despite the Taliban being linked with Al Qaeda and a direct threat to China and its Uighur-based insurgency in Xinjiang, the Chinese did cooperate with them. Moreover, the Chinese backed their Pakistani allies and supported Pakistan's endeavors and their official and unofficial relationship with the Taliban.

Post 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001, changed and shook the world. Many governments were forced to decide, whether they would support George W. Bush and his Global War on Terror, or risk being labeled as part of the "axis of evil." China, traditionally, viewed Afghanistan as a means to counter Russia. Since 2001, it has slowly broken away from its traditional hands off approach, and has gradually become more hands-on. Scobell maintains that leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has developed a national security framework of four concentric circles.

The first circle or ring consists of all the territory that Beijing currently controls or claims, including, of course, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in China's far west. The second ring extends just beyond the borders of the PRC and encompasses the adjacent areas around China's periphery; the third ring contains China's wider Asia Pacific neighborhood, including South Asia and Central Asia and the forth ring comprises the rest of the globe. Afghanistan is located within both second and third rings because it is not only in China's neighborhood but it also shares a common border—albeit a short one of 92km.[\[xxvii\]](#)

China was quick to react after the fall of the Taliban, and the establishment of the Karzai government, and sought to establish friendly relations with Kabul.[\[xxviii\]](#) China re-established its embassy in February 2002 in the center of Kabul's diplomatic district. The Afghan government also recognized that China was a rising power and that they must have a proactive relationship with Beijing. President Karzai visited China after one month of taking office in January 2002.[\[xxix\]](#) The most senior Chinese official to visit Afghanistan to date has been Zhou Yongkang of the Politburo Standing Committee. Zhou, "stressed the two countries have agreed to established 'strategic and cooperative partnership.'" [\[xxx\]](#) President Ashraf Ghani's first official trip as President was also to China. This gesture by Ghani illustrates that Afghanistan sees China as a regional power.

Scobell stresses that China sees Afghanistan as the "epicenter of radical Muslim extremism for the wider region."[\[xxxi\]](#) Given Afghanistan placement in China's second ring of national security, if Afghanistan becomes unstable it could impact China's first ring, which is the Uighur separatist movement in Xinjiang. From this prism, it behooves China to prevent chaos and a failed state in Afghanistan. China expert Zhao Huasheng states that China's supports the following activities in Afghanistan:

Guaranteeing Afghanistan as an independent and sovereign state, finally governed by Afghans; reach peace through political reconciliation; promote a progressive society; have an Afghanistan friendly to its neighbors; and conduct international cooperation, with the United Nations holding a dominate role.[\[xxxii\]](#)

To achieve a successful metric in these areas, China has chosen a four-point approach: safeguarding security and stability, developing the economy, political reconciliation, allowing Afghans to choose their model of governance, and lastly enhancing international cooperation.[\[xxxiii\]](#) To date, China has worked with the international community and the Afghan government on a variety of these areas, but it has been difficult to gauge the extent of China's success in these areas.

Economic Development

China has not engaged in symbolic diplomacy but also provided financial assistance to the Afghan government. Huasheng provides figures from official Chinese government sources: China promised Afghanistan \$150 million dollars in 2002. From 2002-2010 China's gave \$205.3 million to the Afghan government. Additionally in 2011, China provided \$23.7 million to the Afghanistan.[\[xxxiv\]](#) China has also aided Afghanistan in infrastructure development by building the state hospital in Kabul and the Parvan province irrigation project. China has also trained Afghan government officials, and has exempted 95 percent of goods being imported to China from Afghanistan from duties.[\[xxxv\]](#) China's charity has not only worked to stabilize Afghanistan, but has positively impacted Chinese business in Afghanistan.

China's level of economic aid has also bought China great influence within the Afghan political elite. Ultimately, China's goodwill and influence won them the most lucrative financial deal to date in Afghanistan. China's Metallurgical Group won the tender for the Aynak copper mine. The group plans in investing \$4 billion in Afghanistan over the next several years, and the profits will far surpass its initial investment.[xxxvi] China has also won major projects in oil and gas extraction in western and northern Afghanistan. This is the first time the Afghan government has allowed a foreign company to extract oil and gas.[xxxvii]

According to Jonathan Ludwig, "the Chinese are now in place in Afghanistan for the primary if not sole purpose of obtaining natural resources, a complete turnaround from their initial relationship with the Afghan nation." [xxxviii] Thus, China's economic aid to Afghanistan in 2002 and to date, has not only positively impacted Afghanistan, but has also netted profits for China. Chinese goodwill, while helping Afghanistan, has ultimately helped China more. This type of predatory economic foreign policy has been conducted by China for years in Sudan and other parts of Africa, as well as in Myanmar.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Afghanistan was a late comer to the SCO, and is currently an observer. Moreover, President Hamid Karzai has attended every annual SCO meeting since 2004, and President Ashraf Ghani spoke at the annual SCO conference on July, 10 2015. Addressing the heads state, Ghani blasted his neighbors for sponsoring terrorism to destabilize Afghanistan and the region.[xxxix] China will most certainly use the SCO to promote its Afghan agenda. In 2011, China's foreign minister stated at the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, "The role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other existing international organizations and cooperation mechanisms should be brought into full play." [xl] While it is highly unlikely for the SCO with China in the lead to commit military troops to Afghanistan, it is likely that as China takes a more active role in Afghanistan, it could facilitate intelligence sharing between Afghanistan and its neighbors. It could also facilitate training of the Afghan military personnel.

Zhao Huasheng contends that China would be best suited for impacting political developments between Afghanistan and its neighbors.[xli] *The Wall Street Journal* and several other news outlets, reported that representatives from the Afghan government and Taliban, met in Xinjiang, China from 19-20 May 2015 to discuss a potential peace process. Of note, it was reported that representatives from Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI) were also present.[xlii] This account is noteworthy, as it illustrates that China is facilitating these talks between the Afghan and Pakistani governments and the Taliban. It goes to show that the United States is no longer the only means to peace in Afghanistan, and the Afghan government looks to China as an economic and political regional power-house.

Pakistan's Prism

When discussing Afghanistan and China, one must discuss the perspectives and the interplay between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan impacts China's relationship with Afghanistan. Since Pakistan's birth in 1947, it has been at odds with its western neighbor, Afghanistan. The source of contention can be found at the Durand line, which splits the ethnic Pashtuns into two different states —Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the Pakistani narrative, the border was defined conclusively in the 1893 agreement between the Afghan Amir, Abdul Rahman Khan, and British India. [xliii] The common Afghan narrative maintains that the treaty was signed under duress and that the Durand Line was meant as a buffer zone between the Afghan Empire and the British Empire, not an international border.[xliv] Pashtuns have also been the dominant ethnic group since there has been an Afghanistan—the names "Afghan" and "Pashtun" are often used synonymously with one another. The Pashtuns have inhabited the territory between Kabul to the Peshawar Valley, and from Kandahar to Quetta

since time immemorial.^[xlv] Moreover, because of the historical, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and cultural linkages, the Afghans view the Durand Line as illegitimate.^[xlvi] In his study of the Durand Line, Conrad Shetter cites author Haroon Sana, that, “Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Afghan rulers continued to exert their influence on the tribal areas east of the border as if it did not exist at all.”^[xlvii] Kabul also objected that the Pashtuns were never given the option to become independent, or to choose Afghanistan. The Pashtuns were only given the option of Pakistan or India.^[xlviii] As espoused the Hollings Center report on the Durand Line:

Afghan leaders also argued that the various agreements between British India and Afghanistan, including the Durand Line, lapsed when the British left South Asia and were not transferable to the new state of Pakistan. And even if Pakistan were deemed a legal successor state, the Afghans argued, the Durand Line remained illegitimate because they had been coerced by the British into accepting the agreement. Although they might have agreed on nothing else, since that time successive Afghan regimes in Kabul (monarchist, republican, communist, Islamist, and democratic) have all maintained the policy of refusing to grant de jure recognition to the existing border with Pakistan, souring relations with that country for the past sixty years.^[xlix]

The Durand Line issue brought the states of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the brink of war in 1955, 1961 and 1977-78.^[l] Pakistan’s viewpoint of the Pashtun issue is zero-sum. Pakistan cannot afford to cede territory as it would splinter an already tumultuous nation state, trying to maintain its sovereignty. Moreover, Robert Kaplan states, “Pakistan, with its ‘Islamic’ bomb, its Taliban- and al Qaeda-infested northwestern borderlands, its dysfunctional cities, and territorially based ethnic groups...for which Islam could never provide the common glue, was commonly referred to as the most dangerous country in the world, (is) a nuclearizing Yugoslavia in the making.”^[li] Therefore, the fear of fragmenting over the Durand Line and the Pashtun issue has shaped Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan since its inception as a nation state. Moreover, beyond the Durand Line issue— Pakistan desires a weak and inept Afghanistan, which is divided so that Afghanistan can provide, “strategic depth,” in case of a conventional war with India.^[lii] According to Christian Parenti, “Pakistan dominates Afghan consumer markets, it receives water from the undammed Kabul and Kunar rivers, and it loots Afghanistan’s ghostly battlefields for scrap metal, tons of it. Pakistan’s benefits from a weak Afghanistan are myriad.”^[liii] Therefore Pakistan’s perspective is that they cannot afford a strong, secular and nationalistic Afghanistan as its western neighbor. The Pakistani viewpoint contends that Afghanistan can potentially lay claim to Pashtun lands across the Durand line, and call the Durand Line null and void, dam the Kabul and Kunar rivers, and ally with India in a conventional Pakistan-Indian war.

It is for this reason that Islamabad has chosen to use proxy forces to destabilize Afghanistan since the early 1950s, starting with the founding of the Hezbe-Islami on Pakistani soil, and supporting Gulbudin Hekmatyaaar, and Ahmed Shah Massoud’s failed coup in the early 1974.^[liv] Diego Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, also contends that, “Pakistani harassment of the Daud reached its climax in a series of Islamabad- orchestrated raids on police posts in the Panjsher Valley.”^[lv] Moreover Cordovez maintains that Pakistan was involved in the attempted Islamic fundamentalist coups on the Daud’s regime in September of 1973 and June of 1974. Since then Pakistan has relied on subservient Mujahidin forces, and finally the Taliban, to subdue Afghanistan, and to protect against its own perceived fragmentation by a strong Afghan state. To this day, Pakistan supports many factions of the Taliban, mainly the Haqqani network, and the Taliban’s spiritual and administrative headquarters operates openly in Quetta, Pakistan.^[lvi]

On 30 August, 2015, U.S. National Security advisor Susan Rice grilled Islamabad on its support to the Taliban, and since then the talks of cutting military aide to Islamabad has dominated the South Asian media outlets.^[lvii] Surrounded by India and Afghanistan, which it considers hostile, Pakistan has sought the helping hand of the Chinese as the great geo-political equalizer. China is Pakistan's greatest ally^[lviii], and thus Pakistan's Afghan policy greatly influences Sino-Afghan relations.

The Indian Angle

India's relationship with the land that is now known as Afghanistan goes back to 9th Century when Mahmood of Ghazni invaded India. From that time until the mid-18th Century, India (at least northern India) was ruled by Afghans or dynasties that originated in Afghanistan (Ghaznavids, Ghorids, Khiljis, Tughlaks, Lodis, Suris and the Mughals.)^[lix] This relationship was not always friendly or benign, as the Afghan forces were notorious for the occasional outburst of looting, raping, and pillaging. India fought with the Afghans on and off again over the course of nine centuries. Afghanistan, also, fought three wars with the British Empire in which many of the foot soldiers were drawn from various Indian ethnic groups. However, since the birth of modern India, Delhi has remained friendly towards all the Afghan regimes, except for the Taliban. As Kaplan states, "In the 1980s, India backed the secular pro-Soviet regime of Mohammad Najibullah."^[lx] During the Taliban years, India backed the Northern Alliance, along with Iran and Russia, and Pakistan backed the Taliban. As Kaplan, contends, India supports a friendly government in Kabul, in order to pressure Islamabad with a two front security dilemma.^[lxi] India has taken an active role in supporting the new Afghan government since 2001. India has invested in the future of the Afghan military, by training Afghan cadets at its prestigious Dehradun military academy.^[lxii] This type of military aid signals a deep commitment by Delhi as it is investing in Afghanistan's human capital.

According to Larry Goodson, "India has a broader and deeper relationship with Afghanistan. It signed a strategic partnership in 2011, and built roads there and in Iran, as well as the Chabahar Port in Iran in 2009 in order to weaken Afghan dependence on Pakistan for access to the outside world."^[lxiii] India has also supported Kabul's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since 2006. According to figures cited by Goodson, India has donated over one billion dollars since 2002.^[lxiv] Recently, India built the Salma dam in Herat, Afghanistan. The Afghans, to honor India's commitment, renamed it, the Afghan-Indian Friendship Dam.^[lxv] India has also named a major New Delhi street after the slain Northern Alliance commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud.

India also influences Afghan society through soft power; in this case through Bollywood.^[lxvi] Many Afghans are fans of Indian movies and songs, and no doubt this plants a positive vestige of India deep within the Afghan psyche. The added fact that Afghan characters have been portrayed in a positive light by Bollywood, makes them attractive entertainment for the Afghans; the Indian blockbuster *Qurbani* highlights Bollywood's warm sentiments towards Afghans.^[lxvii] Moreover many of the Bollywood A-listers boast Afghan heritage.^[lxviii] Goodson maintains that Pakistan has used the Taliban to influence Afghanistan, while India has chosen to invest in stability.^[lxix] Pakistan's support to the Taliban and its policy towards Afghanistan has created a generation of Afghans who are anti-Pakistani as espoused by William Dalrymple's 2013 Brookings Institute report.^[lxx] Therefore, India's positive relationship with Afghanistan, and its bitter rivalry with China and Pakistan will influence Sino-Afghan relations. In a geo-strategic great game, China is in need of Afghanistan's mines and rare earth minerals. Should China fail to take advantage of the opportunity to stabilize Afghanistan, India is sure to step in. It has already bid and won the contract for the Hajigak mine, which holds an estimated 1.8 billion metric tons of iron ore;^[lxxi] much to the chagrin of China. So too, India has the added advantage of linguistic affinity. Dari was the official language of the Indian Mughal Court; Hindi, Dari, and Pashto all descend from the same language family tree. Moreover, India has the cross-cultural advantage over China when dealing with Afghanistan.

All of these factors constitute imperatives for China to ensure stability in Afghanistan.

Promises

China not only boasts the economic capability, but also the engineering and industrial might to stabilize the Afghan economy. A principle tenet of effectively fighting an insurgency utilizing Counter-Insurgency (COIN) methods and doctrine is the ability to stabilize the economy.^[lxxii] If China invests in Afghanistan's infrastructure and human capital, while supporting Afghanistan for long term success—the benefits would most likely help China with current development projects and economic interests. China can replicate its Loess Plateau success in Afghanistan, hence creating millions of acres of productive land from wastelands and sustainable jobs for hundreds of thousands of landless Afghan peasants.^[lxxiii] Moreover, a stable Afghanistan would prevent insurgent groups from accessing China's Xianjing region and igniting a Uighur insurgency. By China investing in a stable Afghanistan, Beijing would also be in line with U.S. policies, and this will further strengthen the China-U.S. relationship. Such a development would result in sustained peace through economic cooperation.

Pitfalls

China's rivalry with India has strengthened its alliance with Pakistan.^[lxxiv] If China with its strong tilt towards supporting Islamabad, backs Pakistan's policy of supporting the Taliban and proposing to broker peace with the Taliban, this will result in a chaotic regional situation. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, some U.S. policy makers, China and Pakistan support peace with the Taliban.^[lxxv] One of China's avowed goals in Afghanistan is "peaceful political reconciliation." This course of action has two fatal flaws. One, it allows Islamabad to be the primary broker, which is parallel to the Soviet- Afghan War, when Pakistan controlled all access to the Afghan freedom fighters. By so doing they succeeded to fortify and support their proxy forces. ^[lxxvi] The end result was a civil war that ravaged Afghanistan; subsequently Pakistan introduced the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which resulted in total chaos. Second, peace with the Taliban, whether controlled by Islamabad, Beijing or Washington is still a bad idea. The Taliban, and their harsh interpretation of Islam, counter the basic Afghan societal fabric and psyche. "Talibistan," and "Afghanistan," cannot co-exist—they are anathema to each other. This viewpoint which is epitomized and propagated by many scholars and writers, including Teun Van Dongen, states, "The Taliban is no IRA. Diplomacy won't convince this prickly nemesis to magically disarm and de-radicalize."^[lxxvii] If it is possible to negotiate peace with the Taliban, it would be morally abhorrent, as the Taliban stand against every value that civilized societies believe in. If China insists on negotiating with the Taliban, then it is incumbent on the international community to pressure it to change its stance. Since we didn't negotiate with the Nazis, ISIS, and Al Qaeda, why should we entertain negotiations with the Taliban? Therefore, if China is to fulfill its role as a regional leader, not just a powerful country that exploits weaker countries for its own economic interests, then it must distance itself from the current Pakistani narrative, and utilize its influence to dissuade Pakistan from its calculated support to the Taliban and proposed peace talks.

Conclusion

As a rising regional power, China has started to fix its gaze beyond its borders. This has been evident in their South China Sea expansion, as well their economic pursuits in Africa. Moreover, Sino-Afghan relations include Sino-Pakistan and Sino-Indian interchanges. Though China is Pakistan's closest ally, in order to succeed in its Afghan policy, it needs to distance itself from Islamabad's Afghan narrative. With India maintaining a strong presence and competing for resources and influence over the Kabul government, China must tread carefully and take decisions that are mutually beneficial for both Afghanistan and itself, or risk losing influence over to New Delhi. Sino-Afghan relations have reached a

critical juncture. China needs to realize that peaceful reconciliation with the Taliban is an idea pregnant with unspeakable horrors, and persuade Pakistan to cut off all manner of support to the Taliban. With the Taliban cut from Pakistani aid, they will be rendered ineffective as a fighting force—an insurgent force without a safe haven, freedom of maneuver, weapons, and money will not last very long. With the Taliban defeated, Afghanistan will once again become a stable and peaceful country, and this will result in maximum return of investment for China. After all, China views its foreign policy through an economic prism. Conversely, proceeding along the path of reconciliation will set destructive forces in motion for the entire region.

End Notes

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[xxxii] Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 5.

[xxxiii] Hausheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 5.

[xxxiv] Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, 6.

[xxxv] *Ibid.*, 6.

[xxxvi] *Ibid.*, 6.

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